FIREWEED: A MEMOIR

PROLOGUE: Summer 1983

Thunder, lightning, and all the rain that Yellowstone National Park could conjure that day seemed determined to wash us out from under a skinny lodgepole pine. Wrapped tightly around my father's leg, I looked up to see my brother cradled safely in his arms.

Jon-Jon was eight, only nineteen months younger than me, but because he was supposed to have died at birth and a doctor at Duke University named him a "miracle baby," my parents treasured him as such. Around my neck, they hung all the hopes and dreams they brought to America, their expectations so great I always felt like a disappointment.

Mā Ma stood in the middle of the trail, exposed to the elements, beckoning for me to join her, to stand my ground. Her hood was down, flapping in the wind like a cape. Her wavy black hair, always kept short, licked the back of her neck like flames. Behind her, wisps of white smoke escaped from a fumarole.

"Isn't this fun?" Her voice was the melodic line against the beat of the rain.

Bà Ba shifted his weight. Apart from the thrill of testing the limits of his old reliable green Subaru Outback off-road, my father was not a fan of Mā Ma's annual national park trips, which she started when I was four and Jon-Jon two. He always complained: *Makes no sense! Why go somewhere with bad Chinese restaurants and get eaten by mosquitoes?* While Mā Ma took us on expeditions like hunting unnamed caves, he waited in the car.

Lightening rippled across the skies, closer and closer as if it was homing in on me. I started to lose it.

Mā Ma said, “Xiǎo Qín, do you know the name of this trail?” Mā Ma only used my Chinese name when she wanted me to pay attention. She pulled out her camera from inside her jacket and studied me through her lens.

“Artists Paintpots!”

I wailed louder.

“Did you hear me, Xiǎo Qín? This trail is designed for us.” I waited for the delicious snap, snap, snap. Then, camera safely hidden again, Mā Ma threw her arms into the darkening sky. She closed her eyes, leaned back and tried to catch it all on her tongue.

The more the three of us struggled, the more my mother seemed to relax into a landscape.

“Look,” she pointed at the sky, undulating like liquid silver. “It’s so beautiful.”

I thought she was beautiful.

CHAPTER 1: Summer 1994

Rain pooled in my eyes, sorted the ends of my hair into rivers, seeped into my underwear. I stood on the shore of Trout Lake in Glacier National Park beneath the blackest sky. I planted my feet the way I thought Mā Ma would have, then stretched my arms above.

Why? That was the question I threw up to stars I could not see. Liver cancer had claimed both Mā Ma and Jon-Jon. A year ago, I draped myself across Jon-Jon's shiny coffin, refusing to let the pallbearers place my eighteen-year-old brother into the ground. A week ago, just shy of my twenty-first birthday, I had ordered Mā Ma's casket shut before anyone else would be haunted with what I can still see today: a face emptied of all that Mā Ma believed in and caked with cheap makeup. Bà Ba sold our house, purged everything that reminded him of Mā Ma and Jon-Jon, including me it seemed. Then, he joined a Chinese dating service. My relatives expected me to do the same: save face, go on with my life as if nothing bad had happened.

Jiā Chǒu Bù Kě Wài Chuán. Don't wash your dirty linens in public.

Instead, I shocked them all by doing the most drastic thing I had ever done in my life so far. I abandoned my boyfriend and Bà Ba on a train platform and travelled for the first time all by myself.

I couldn't stand watching Bà Ba grieve in a way that offended me, so my first instinct was to run away to a national park because every summer, our road trips to these wild places felt like a homecoming. Among the nearly fifty national parks in the United States and Canada that we explored together before Mā Ma and Jon-Jon died, Glacier was my favorite. The Blackfeet

call it the “backbone of the world,” perhaps due to the Continental Divide or Triple Divide where water drains into the Arctic, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans. At the time, I did not know about this hydrologic phenomenon or that this is the only place in America that bears four designations: national park, biosphere reserve, international peace park, and world heritage site. The Blackfeet call it home because their ancestors hunted, fished, and gathered medicinal plants inside the park and now their people are fighting for joint management of the park and voluntary closure of sacred sites. All I could articulate in my grief was that Glacier felt like a “Batcave” to me, a place where I could heal in safety and privacy. I had only visited this park once with my family, when I was sixteen, but there was something about the mountains and glaciers, a landscape carved by moraines, cirques, eskers, and arêtes that sparked a kinship.

I was born in a hospital in North Carolina that no longer exists and raised in tract homes throughout California. My ancestors originated in China, but I’ve never been there. Mā Ma’s side of the family is from the windy canals of Suzhou, the Venice of China. The only thing my parents ever told me about Suzhou was that it produced beautiful women. Recently, Bà Ba visited Anhui where he was born and when I begged him to take me someday, he said it was a bad idea. “The communists destroyed everything. You can’t even pay respects to your great grandparents,” he said bitterly. “Their grave was dug up.” My parents fled Suzhou and Anhui when they were in elementary school, grew up in Taiwan, came to the United States for college and never returned.

My memories of Taiwan are equally disturbing. When Bà Ba’s father died, we were forced to wear the ugliest burlap sacks, kowtow for hours, and tie strips of black cloth to our arms, which caused people on the streets to run away from us like we had the plague. Mā Ma explained that some Chinese people believe that Death is attracted to mourners. That’s why the

cab drivers either refused to pick us up or they cranked up a Buddha mourning chant, slammed on the gas pedal and swerved wildly through crowded streets until they could dump us on a sidewalk in the rain.

The funeral included a lot of fake crying, burning of paper money, and the uncomfortable wail-sing pitch of the MC, followed by a horrifying scene of grandpa's body being shoved unceremoniously into an incinerator. I will never forget the smell (made worse by Mā Ma's fear that we might be inhaling grandpa's ashes) and the metal sheet they pulled out with grandpa's charred remains littered with white bony chips, which the cremators mixed up roughly with a rake. Then, while professional mourners knelt on the ground and wailed, each of us were required to select one bone to place in a marble urn.

I also remember going to school with my Taiwanese cousin and accidentally falling asleep at my desk. I woke to the whispers of the entire class crowded around me like I was a frog they had dissected. *Měiguó Rén. American*, they said as if that explained my behavior. Minutes later, I witnessed a teacher beat a child's hand with a stick and my cousin warned me that if I fell asleep again, that might happen to me too!

My job as a front desk clerk at Lake McDonald Lodge embarrassed my relatives especially when some days I had to make beds and clean toilets. They would've been horrified to know that beside Trout Lake, I broke one of my parents' cardinal rules: never ever go anywhere alone with a boy unless you are married. But that was just one of their many strict Chinese cultural and Catholic stipulations I had to abide by under their roof such as: no tattoos, no sex before marriage, no drinking before the legal age, no dating until college. So, even if I didn't believe I had to remain faithful to my boyfriend, I wouldn't have attempted a romantic relationship with anyone at Glacier.